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SUBJECT: DAGESTAN: "IT IS ENOUGH THAT THE PEOPLE KNOW
THERE WAS AN ELECTION"

Classified By: PolMinCouns Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (b, d)

"It is enough that the people know there was an election.
The people who cast the votes decide nothing. The people who
count the votes decide everything."

-- Soso Jugashvili, Caucasus Philosopher

Introduction and Summary

1. (C) Dagestan went to the polls March 11, as did many
localities in Russia, but the elections bore little relation
-- both in process and in meaning -- to what happened
elsewhere in the country. The elections were a way for the
four main power groupings to test their strength for the
first time since former leader Magomedali Magomedov -- "the
Grandfather" retired last year and Putin appointed a
full-fledged President, the reforming technocrat Mukhu
Aliyev, in his place. In addition, the elections represent a
compromise by local groups with the trappings of democracy
and party politics foisted upon them by Moscow; the elections
are a veneer over the real system, not unlike a Halloween
costume a child might put on for one day to please its
parents. Mukhu Aliyev is standard bearer for United Russia,
but leaders of the other three power groups were all on the
United Russia ticket as well, all the while supporting
candidates in opposing parties -- the factions transcend
party bounds. The results were carefully calculated to
please Moscow while finding a middle point based on the
relative strengths of the four factions. But the basic
problems of inter-factional strife remain. End Summary.

Warlord Democracy

2. (C) Time was, Dagestan held the fairest elections on
earth. That was after the 1992 collapse of the Soviet Union
and the retreat of Moscow from the affairs of the small
mountain republic. In February 1998, for example, Said
Amirov -- a warlord confined to a wheelchair by a 1992
assassination attempt, one of the 14 he has survived -- ran
for mayor of Makhachkala, Dagestan's capital. Amirov is of
the Dargins, the second largest of Dagestan's 39 official
ethnic groups. Amirov's main opponent was a warlord of the
Avars, Dagestan's largest ethnic group.

3. (C) Both realized that using the normal techniques for a
Caucasus election -- buying votes, stuffing ballots,
falsifying the count -- would unleash a clan war that could
kill hundreds or even thousands. So they agreed to hold an
honest election, because only an election without a hint of
falsification would allow the loser to concede defeat without
losing dignity. Before the election, both sides had thugs
out on the street ensuring that votes were not bought (all
ethnic groups are represented in Makhachkala, and no one

group predominates). Both sides had thugs at the entrance to polling precincts, checking passports to ensure that only those entitled to vote in a particular polling place was allowed to enter it. Both sides had thugs observing the voting, to ensure there was not ballot-stuffing or multiple voting. And both sides had thugs watching over the vote count. Amirov won, and remains mayor to this day -- and the most powerful warlord in Dagestan.

14. (C) Dagestan was run in Moscow's absence, in the years following the Soviet collapse, by a curious ethnic balancing system. Dagestan's centuries-old unit of power was the "jamaat," best translated as "canton." This was a self-governing group of clans living in one small geographical area. There are several hundred of these, each with its own dialect. When the Russians arrived in the 19th century they couldn't deal with that many different peoples, and grouped those speaking closely related languages together -- all those speaking dialects close to Avar became Avars, etc. That reduced the number of peoples to 39, and these were further reduced for political purposes to 14 by subsuming small related groups into the Avars and Dargins. After Moscow's influence disappeared from Dagestan in the early 1990s, the locals formed a Presidential Council -- rather than a one-person Presidency -- composed of one representative from each of the 14 groups. At the same time, government ministries and senior bureaucratic posts were carefully doled out to ensure that each group got its fair share of the top jobs.

15. (C) The competition between jamaats remained and even intensified now that, for example, all of the Avar jamaats were competing for the one Avar seat on the Council. This tension produced a free-wheeling political system in which each jamaat or bloc of jamaats had its own "ethno-party"

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capable of calling on significant armed force to back up its political claims. Parties banded together in ad hoc alliances to promote their own interests and defend the interests of the wider ethnic group (when these did not conflict). Magomedali Magomedov, "The Grandfather" and Chair of the Presidential Council, kept the peace by brilliantly playing all off against all, acting as the peacemaker. Any one party could exercise a veto by calling its ethnic militia down from the mountains, guns at the ready, to take over the main square of Makhachkala. Magomedov received their delegations, made promises and concessions, and kept the balance. Of course, sometimes warlords insisted on demands that all the others thought were excessive. The others would talk to him. If he still would not see reason, well, a large and very public explosion usually put an end to the demands. As Soso Jugashvili also said, "No man, no problem."

The New Order

16. (C) But much has changed in Russia, and perforce in Dagestan. Under Putin, Moscow has returned with a vengeance. It took six years to force out "The Grandfather," but Magomedov finally retired in 2006. Putin chose the technocratic speaker of Dagestan's parliament, Mukhu Aliyev, to be President, replacing the entire Presidential Council system. Aliyev seems to have been the choice of the "Grandfather," and also seems to have been acceptable to the reformist Presidential Representative for the Southern Federal District, Dmitriy Kozak. In 2007, now under close scrutiny from Moscow, Dagestan could not avoid the party system imposed from the center. The Dagestani elites have had to find other ways to resolve disputes. Elections become a tool in the process, but not the process itself.

17. (C) Not that the parties of the Center have any illusions that Dagestan politics have much to do with national party politics. As the leader of the Union of Rightist Forces (SPS) told us after his party was disqualified from running

in the March 11 election for the Republic's Parliament, "We picked the wrong warlord." Moscow's main interest has been to ensure that there is a veneer of national politics -- however thin -- over the power struggles internal to Dagestan.

18. (C) Seven parties nominally competed in the elections. However, all members of the four main factions vying for power -- and everyone else who matters -- were members of United Russia, the Kremlin's party of power. The factions break down as follows:

-- First is Said Amirov, still Mayor of Makhachkala and still the most powerful warlord in the country. But he is under threat. He was the main muscle for "Grandfather" Magomedali Magomedov, like Amirov an ethnic Dargin. "The Grandfather" faced opposition from the Avars, who believed that as the largest ethnic group they should have had the presidency. Amirov defended Magomedov. But tensions arose between the two of them, as Amirov made it plain that he thought "The Grandfather" had agreed to repay the favor by stepping aside in a timely way and letting Amirov take over. Magomedov had no such plans.

-- Thus there is friction between Amirov and the second group, the faction nominally headed by "The Grandfather's" son Magomedislam Magomedov, now speaker of Parliament, but with "The Grandfather" in the wings as consigliere. The two groups are vying both for the leadership of the Dargins and the political legacy of "The Grandfather." Meanwhile, now that there is an Avar President, Amirov is gradually being deprived of his access to "budgetary resources" (i.e., direct theft from subventions paid from Moscow), rent-seeking opportunities, and patronage.

-- The third group is that of the current president, Mukhu Aliyev. Aliyev is a strange character for Dagestan: technocratic, not corrupt, not willing to play the political game the way "The Grandfather" used to. As one of our guides to Dagestani political life put it, under Magomedov, life was simple. You wanted a lucrative government job, you paid Magomedov the agreed price, and the job was yours. Now, under Aliyev, those who have jobs are supposed to work at them, not just make money by using their office. Those who work badly are replaced. Rent-seekers find this innovation disquieting. Aliyev is the head of United Russia in Dagestan, and he controls the United Russia ticket. His is the only group using only one party. Those he picked for parliament are, like him, technocrats.

-- The fourth force is the so-called "Northern Alliance." This is a group of powerful Avar warlords from the northern tier of the Avar country - the non-mountainous

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Khasavyurt-Kizlyar region, as opposed to the original Avar homeland in the high mountains of the country's west. The Alliance was deeply opposed to Magomedov, and its members are eager to show their loyalty to and support for their fellow-Avar, Mukhu Aliyev, even though he was not their candidate for president. They are so eager, in fact, that they perform services for him that he has not even asked for.

19. (C) Aliyev tries to keep his distance from the Alliance. In the current elections, one of the Alliance's strongmen, Sagid Murtazaliyev, was running for district chief of Kizlyar. Murtazaliyev really is a strongman, having been an Olympic and World Champion weightlifter. Aliyev, conscious that Moscow is always looking over his shoulder, opposed Murtazaliyev's election: Kizlyar is a largely ethnic Russian district, it has always had Russian district chiefs, and Aliyev declared that he would prefer to see a Russian elected this time as well. But Murtazaliyev not only won in Kizlyar; he also got a kinsman elected district chief of the Tsumada district, in the western mountains, from which his clan stems.

¶10. (C) In addition, Aliyev is responsible to Moscow for the quality of his party list. So, for example, it would have looked bad for the two brothers of Northern Alliance grandee Gadzhi Makhachev, Duma representative for Makhachkala, to run on the United Russia ticket. Neither they nor Gadzhi fit the technocratic mold that Moscow wants to see. So Gadzhi put them on the Just Russia ticket, running against his own party. There was another reason Gadzhi did this: he ran his younger brother in Amirov's home district, trying to use his influence to reduce Amirov's vote.

¶11. (C) The elections held on March 11 served a purpose for these four factions, not just for Moscow. They were the first chance the factions have had to demonstrate their relative strength in the new power alignment that came into being with the retirement of "The Grandfather." True to the dictum of Soso the Sage of the Caucasus, their strength is shown not in the numbers of those who cast votes, but in the numbers of ballots that are counted.

The Casting, the Counting...

¶12. (C) The elections proceeded in four phases. First, the clans infiltrated their candidates into all the party lists and start to gain support for their own candidates and destroy their opponents' support. Amirov, while himself firmly on the United Russia ticket (all factions want Kremlin support), started financing candidates on the Union of Rightist Forces (SPS) ticket (he was the "wrong warlord" to whom the party's Moscow leader referred above). The Northern Alliance made a successful countermove: through a combination of pressure, influence, disincentives (some of them involving automatic weapons) and incentives, three SPS candidates were disqualified. This wiped the entire ticket off the ballot for parliament, though SPS remained on the ballot for local councils and district chiefs. And then there were six.

¶13. (C) At this point we should describe the six:

-- As mentioned, United Russia (YeR) is the Kremlin's party of power and also the party of the president of Dagestan. As the party of power, most of the powerful belong to it, regardless of what ticket they run on.

-- Just Russia (SR) is the second Kremlin Party of power, and has the advantage that Dagestan's president does not control the ticket. Thus it is a home for warlords, grandees and other powerful folks who might be an embarrassment on the YeR ticket. As we mentioned, Gadzhi Makhachev ran his two brothers on this ticket. Another colorful figure of SR is a Mountain Jew from Derbent named Sergey Pinkhasov; Makhachev appears to be a patron of the Derbent Jewish community, one having been among the boys he financed to attend a military high school in San Diego.

-- The Agrarians and Communists are traditional parties in Dagestan. The Agrarians still have some strong figures in their party, but the communists have lost steadily since 1996, when Zyuganov, the Communist candidate, received 70 percent of Dagestan's vote in the first round of the election (he only received 30 percent in the run-off against Yeltsin, leading most observers to conclude that the second round of the election had seen the application of traditional Caucasus political technologies). The Communists are left with party activists, but no money; however, they appeared to have some money in the final days of the campaign, and observers

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strongly suspected this came from Amirov.

-- The Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR), like the SPS, was initially disqualified from the race for parliament. However, that decision was reversed after Zhirinovskiy made a

personal plea to Makhachev. That was a safe move, since a Great Russian chauvinist party had no chances of making inroads in overwhelmingly non-Russian Dagestan.

-- The Patriots are a largely regional party, known to represent the interests of the Lezgins and related nationalities in the usually overlooked southern part of the country. Representing a disgruntled electoral base, the Patriots were a good vehicle for all disgruntled Dagestanis in a Republic whose social injustice and gap between rich and poor is high even by Russian standards. The Patriots were impoverished, but suddenly received massive infusions of cash, known to be from Makhachkala Mayor Amirov (by unofficial count, the Patriots appear to have taken 20% of the vote in Makhachkala, drawing on support much broader than the Lezgin diaspora there).

¶14. (C) After the first phase, before election day, came the elections themselves on March 11. The usual abuses were reported - bought votes, busloads moving from precinct to precinct and voting in all of them, ballot stuffing, etc. The third phase was the counting and preparation of the vote protocols in the precincts. These provided an opportunity for party machine hacks to show their loyalty to their bosses by ensuring that the "right" party or parties got an appropriate vote count. The fourth phase was the preparation of the republic-wide results, in which the original protocols were amended to reflect the results of post-counting negotiations among the principal forces.

¶15. (C) But here a new, fifth phase has interjected itself: the negotiation with Moscow. Results must be acceptable to the Kremlin, and this means making sure that they don't look ridiculous and that they satisfy (i.e., silence) the outraged complaints of national parties such as the Communists. This phase seems to have taken at least a week, as the final results came out well after those of the rest of the regions that voted. In the initial vote count, neither the Communists nor the Patriots passed the 7% barrier for representation in Parliament (Communists were given 5.47%, Patriots 6.1%), though both undoubtedly did better. A Lezgin expert was convinced, for example, that in this phase Said Amirov would "trade" the performance of the Patriots for concessions on the conduct and results of the State Duma elections at the end of this year. In the event, however, the Patriots were allowed to squeak through with 7.07% of the vote, and the Communists received 7.12%. This was done by shaving percentages off other parties. In the preliminary count, YeR received 65.67%; the final count gave them 63.81%. SR went from 11.48% to 10.74%; and the Agrarians from 9.16 to 9.12.

...And the Accounting

¶16. (C) But what of the real results - changes in the balance of power among the leading political groupings? Amirov came out slightly down. He managed to get the Patriots into Parliament, but lost heavily on his backing of SPS. Though he won in his district (turning his seat down to retain his executive position), his majority (in the preliminary count) "only" approached 70%, well below most of the unchallenged YeR stalwarts. This was due to competition from the younger brother of Amirov's blood rival, Gadzhi Makhachev, running on the JR ticket. Amirov may also have lost out to the other Dargin faction, the one headed by the "Grandfather's" son, Magomedsalam Magomedov. In one race for district chief, Amirov's protg lost big to a supporter of Magomedov. This conclusion must be treated gingerly, however, because the report of this race comes in an anti-Amirov newspaper; perhaps it played up the defeat for Amirov while glossing over his victories elsewhere.

¶17. (C) Northern Alliance grandee Gadzhi Makhachev managed to elect a second brother in Khasavyurt, also running on the SR ticket - a demonstration that even running in opposition to his own party he could deliver votes loyal to himself personally. As we mentioned, Makhachev's fellow Ally in the

Northern Alliance, Sagid Murtazaliyev, had a very good day. On the whole, the Northern Alliance seems to have done well.

¶18. (C) It is unclear how President Mukhu Aliyev came out. His technocrats will fill the majority of parliamentary seats, which is perhaps all he cares about: his obvious goal in the elections was to ensure a base of support independent from the clan systems either of his fellow Avars or of other

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ethnic groups.

¶19. (C) How did Moscow come out? On the whole, not too badly. As mentioned above, Moscow had no illusions that Dagestani politics could be made to resemble national politics. The Center just wanted to keep the place out of the news, keep the voting non-violent, and at the end of a day be able to say that local officials, councils and a parliament were elected; this modest ambition was achieved. The inclusion of the Communists in Parliament seems to have silenced national press coverage, and few in Moscow pay attention to the Dagestani media.

One Man, One Problem

¶20. (C) But one of the main power problems of Dagestan remains unresolved and unaddressed by the elections: longtime Minister of Internal Affairs Adilgirey Magomedtagirov. Magomedtagirov is a colorful figure, a high-mountain Avar from the west, big and strong, with great presence, who long ago made a name for himself as police chief in the ethnically Azeri trading city of Derbent, near the Azerbaijani border. Derbent's culture was, like the Azeris, softer and more commercial than the rest of Dagestan, and Magomedtagirov proved extremely effective in ridding the town of known criminals. His technique was simple: he picked them up, planted narcotics on them, threw them in jail, and let them rot. No man, no problem. As Minister of Internal Affairs, his current targets are Islamic radicals, for whom he has devised different tactics: he has vowed that their cases will be terminated before they ever get to court. But that is not the cause of the current problems in the power structure.

¶21. (C) Magomedtagirov, an Avar, was perfect as Minister under the Dargin leader "Grandfather" Magomedov. Magomedtagirov was "The Grandfather's" counterweight to the Dargin warlord and Makhachkala Mayor Amirov. But Magomedtagirov also protected "The Grandfather" against the Northern Alliance, who represented a different part of the Avar lands. That delicate balance changed once Mukhu Aliyev, an Avar, became President. Having two Avars in such high posts is considered an unsustainable disbalance of the system. So Aliyev prepared to demand Magomedtagirov's resignation and put in his place his Dargin deputy, another strong personality. By pure coincidence, however, the deputy was targeted by two assassination attempts, the second of which succeeded. No man, no problem.

¶22. (C) This left Magomedtagirov in place, and finding a successor now grew problematic. So various methods have been employed to force him out. First, an unprecedented strike and demonstration took place in Makhachkala: the MVD's OMON regiment walked out and demanded Magomedtagirov be sacked. It is generally assumed that the only person who could have arranged this action is Makhachkala mayor Said Amirov. When this didn't work, a more direct solution was attempted. In the last few months Magomedtagirov has been the target of several assassination attempts, all of which he has survived. One was a complicated plot by people who evidently had enormous amounts of power and money: the local MVD chief in the Buynaksk district was assassinated, and as expected Magomedtagirov and his associates got in their cars and rushed off to the scene of the crime. The main road to Buynaksk being just by chance closed for repairs, the convoy

had to use a more circular road through the mountains, where they ran into an ambush: a huge mine blasted one of the cars apart and gunmen were waiting to shoot the survivors. Unluckily for the plotters, they blew up the wrong car and Magomedtagirov shot his way out.

¶23. (C) So Dagestan still has the men, and still has the problem. The elections seem to have left the basic power struggle unaffected, but analysts believe the cards are stacked against Makhachkala Mayor Amirov. He is not only faced with opposition from all the Avar factions - the Northern Alliance, the President, the Minister of Internal Affairs - but also with competition against Magomedsalam Magomedov for leadership of the Dargins. Amirov has two things going for him, however. First, he is considered the most ruthless warlord in Dagestan, which is really saying something. Second, he knows that the moment he leaves office there is nowhere on the face of the earth that can hide him - and his entire family - from the murderous blood revenge of his many enemies. Amirov has absolutely nothing to lose to fight to the death. And Dagestani politics, for some time to come, will be ruled less by elections than by the first part of the philosopher Soso Jugashvili's dictum: "Death solves all problems."

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